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THE TENSIONS BETWEEN FEMINISM AND LOVE IN SIRI HUSTVEDT'S *THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN*

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Title: The Tensions between Feminism and Love in Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer without Men*

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Abstract: This essay investigates why and how inequalities in heterosexual love relationships persist in *The Summer without Men*, even though the protagonist as a narrator is engaged in a feminist critique throughout the novel. Materialist feminism and previous research on the novel is used to examine how the protagonist and the other women in the novel balance between conforming to and resisting patriarchal norms. Simone de Beauvoir's theories on patriarchy, marriage and love are used to examine how the protagonist's parents are important in her understanding of love and gender and reveals how her upbringing has influenced her to lose her transcendence in her own marriage. Lena Gunnarsson's theory on 'conformist and resisting strategies' explain the mechanisms that the protagonist and the other women balance between in order to get love. In the end, the protagonist seems to settle for the 'conformist strategy' and take back her husband who left her for another woman, even though she does not believe that he can change. This implies that the novel, although there is a feminist critique throughout it, does seem to recycle some problematic ideas of gender and legitimize unequal heterosexual love relationships.

Keywords: *The Summer without Men*, materialist feminism, love, heterosexual relationships, patriarchy, transcendence

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1. Introduction

“A rupture can deeply mark a man: but in the end, he has his life as man to live. The abandoned woman is nothing, has nothing” (Beauvoir 705). In her groundbreaking existentialist philosophic work *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir questioned why women could not achieve full subjectivity and freedom. She investigated why women and men loved differently and found that women were constructed as embodied subjects and “positioned as inessential and immanent beings in relation to men, while men [were] deemed absolute, essential, and transcendent” (Lowe 197). One might think that heterosexual love relationships should be equal today since, as Lena Gunnarsson states in her *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a feminist-realist ontology of sociosexuality* (2014), “[i]n contemporary western welfare societies power asymmetries based on gender are not legitimate” (99). However, Gunnarsson argues that “ideological and judicial norms of gender equality co-exist quite harmoniously with a persisting reality of gender inequality” (99). The above mentioned works will form the main theoretical platform for this essay, when investigating love and gender inequality in Siri Hustvedt’s novel *The Summer without Men* (2011) [hereafter *Summer*].

Summer is set during the summer of 2009 and is, in short, the story about the poet Mia Fredricksen who suffers from a brief psychotic disorder when her husband of thirty years asks her for a pause in their marriage. The reason for the pause is his young colleague with whom he has started a relationship. The reader also understands that Mia has been getting angrier and angrier during their marriage because she was always put in second place. After having left the ward where she was treated, Mia leaves Brooklyn to go back to her hometown of Bonden, in Minnesota. She meets girls and women who all influence her one way or another and as the novel’s narrator she develops a feminist critique throughout the text, but in the end she is on her way to getting back with her husband. Both the self-search that Mia goes through during the summer and her meetings with girls and women seem to help her mend but also accept that her marriage is unequal and that her husband is incapable of change.

The importance of the unequal gender relations in the heterosexual love relationships in *Summer*, and the consequences that it has for the women, have not been adequately considered by the critics and researchers who have published work on the novel. Some researchers have, quite on the contrary, found that the ending of the novel, where the

protagonist most probably takes back her husband who left her for another woman, is positive and liberating. Christine Marks, in her book *I am because you are – Relationality in the works of Siri Hustvedt* (2014), concludes that *Summer* “is a story of recovery and emancipation” (14), while Britta Bein claims, in her article “Present Women/Absent Men in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Summer Without Men*” (2011), that “the story’s ending suggests a happy one” (17).

My own reading of *Summer* left me amazed by Hustvedt’s skilled, multifaceted work of art but also wondering why smart and tough women end up being diminished in heterosexual love relationships, and more specifically, why the protagonist after a summer of beneficial soul-searching takes her husband back. I claim that materialist feminist theory is needed to investigate the novel in order to understand the mechanisms that are at work. By analyzing the novel with the help of these theories the possibility arises to interpret the novel in another way, where the ending poses a feminist problem in terms of what women sacrifice in the name of love.

1.1 Previous research

Christine Marks investigates, in her above mentioned book, relational identity formation in all of the works of Hustvedt, both fictional and non-fictional, with the help of mainly philosophy and psychoanalysis. Marks has noted that in all of Hustvedt’s novels the characters are “in constant danger of being consumed by others, their unique presence becoming overpowered by the force of other consciousnesses” (22). There are frequent struggles between “identity and difference” and “subject and object” but “there are also positive moments of mutual complementation and intersubjective relation” (22). Rather than a general threat, I see the danger of being consumed by others as a feminist concern in *Summer*, where the protagonist is overpowered by her husband, involuntarily has to break free from him and then decides to go back. Even though Marks discusses *Summer*, her main focus is on other works by Hustvedt.

Where Marks investigates relational identity, Britta Bein instead examines her thesis, in her above mentioned article, that Mia’s psychotic illness is due to the absence of her husband and men in general and that spending time with women helps her handle her illness. Mia’s illness is viewed as a postmodern crisis, where the men represent the postmodern void (1). Boris’s absence is understood as an absence of meaning in a psychoanalytical sense. Bein argues that Mia uses therapeutic writing to cope with her illness and that writing lets her

create her own meaning (13-15). This, argues Bein, allows Mia to, in a post-structuralist tradition of feminism, find out how to use language for her own means. Bein's finds that Mia's crisis ends in something positive and that she becomes a more fulfilled person through it (16). She believes that the ending of the novel "pays credit to [. . .] the possibility of a wife living with her husband in an alliance that allows for both parties to make meaning" (17-18).

Áine Mahon investigates, in her article "Marriage and moral perfectionism in Siri Hustvedt and Stanley Cavell", the correlations between *Summer* and Stanley Cavell's philosophical examinations of re-marriage as the ideal marriage in his book *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cavell has, argues Mahon, developed the moral outlook of perfectionism and assesses "the self and its perfectibility within a marital union" (631). For both Cavell and Hustvedt "[t]he self [. . .] is to be created rather than discovered in interaction with other selves" (633). Mahon argues that "[t]he ideal marriage for both [Hustvedt and Cavell] is re-marriage; in this allegory for human community everyday speaking and listening establishes a reciprocal bond constantly threatened though constantly regained" (649). Mahon also claims that "Mia's development – her progression in Cavellian terms 'from the next to the aversive self' – is achieved at a geographical and psychological remove from all men in her life" (649). Mahon's reading of the novel is focused on the similarities and differences in Hustvedt's and Cavell's above mentioned works.

Natalie Kon-Yu has investigated authorship and Meta-fiction in *Summer* in her article "Authorship and Meta-fiction in Carol Shields' 'Unless' and Siri Hustvedt's 'The Summer without Men'". Kon-Yu draws on post-structuralist theory and in particular the work of Mary Eagleton. She examines how female authorship is important in the novels *Summer* and *Unless*, and argues about *Summer* that "the novel itself functions as a critique of a literary culture which continues to malign the works of female writers" (45). Kon-Yu also argues that "the claiming of the woman author is the most subversive act in [. . .] *Summer* (53).

The above mentioned works analyze the novel by using mainly philosophy, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and post-structuralist feminism. Hustvedt herself is deeply interested in philosophy and psychoanalysis and has written both fictional and non-fictional works on the subject (Appignanesi). *Summer* is clearly also influenced by philosophy and psychoanalysis and it is therefore of course both interesting and fruitful to do research within these areas. However, I argue that by focusing on theories within philosophy, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, important aspects of the novel's implications are overlooked, such as

the fact that structures of inequalities in heterosexual love relationships persists even though they are not legitimate. Hence this essay will focus on materialist feminism and how such inequalities are reproduced.

There are tensions in the novel between on the one hand a feminist critique and the other hand unequal heterosexual love relationships. Love is an important concept for my analysis since the persisting inequalities depend on it. My argument is that the ending of *Summer*, the so called re-marriage, suggests a betrayal of the feminist critique and the attempts at resistance that the novel presents. In this essay I will examine why this potential betrayal occurs, by using materialist feminist theory and building on and, where I find needed, challenging previous research on the novel. The following research questions will be examined:

1. How are Mia's parents important for her understanding of love and gender, and how does this understanding affect how she acts in her own marriage?
2. How might Mia's relations with the other characters, and in particular the other women, help her understand and cope with what it is to love in a patriarchal society?
3. How is imagination and the production of art significant in relation to love in the novel?

1.2 Theory and method

“Love, perhaps even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today [. . .] *Women and Love are underpinnings. Examine them and you threaten the very structure of culture*” (Firestone 121) [emphasis in original]. Already in 1970, Shulamith Firestone pointed out that the enormous significance of love had not been analyzed because of its threatening political significance (121), but ‘love studies’ as a field only really took off in the early 1990s and especially grew in the beginning of the twenty-first century, both among feminist and non-feminist researchers (GEXcel).

Sexuality was for a long time at the center when feminists analyzed gendered power, whereas love was often ignored. Beauvoir's existentialist investigation on love under patriarchy in *The Second Sex* revealed that women's love of men entailed an instance of bad faith, which locked women in immanence, but the second wave discourses drawing on her work focused on heterosexual love as a “kind of delusion or false consciousness” which “forestalled a theoretical acknowledgement of love's liberating potential” (Gunnarsson 4-5).

As an early theorizer on love, Beauvoir argued that women in love can go as far as to tyrannize themselves in their lover's name; everything in her life must be devoted to him, in order to find a *raison d'être*. According to Beauvoir, a woman searches for confirmation in love, of her personality and her past, but she commits her future as well; to make sense of that, she gives it to the other, the essential man. She gives up her transcendence and makes herself a "vassal and slave" (691). She tries to find herself and save herself by beginning to lose herself in the man, but in the end she loses herself, because all reality is in the other person. This, Beauvoir points out, is a kind of devotion that often leads to self-mutilation (691-692).

Beauvoir claimed that women and men love in different ways, and that this is not due to a law of nature, but to the fact that women and men live in different situations and that that is reflected in how their conception of love is different. The differences she points out are that men are subjects, they are ambitious and they act to extend their grasp of the world. This as opposed to women who are:

[D]estined for the male from her earliest childhood, used to seeing him as a sovereign, with whom equality is not permitted [. . .] [she] will dream of surpassing her being toward one of those superior beings [. . .] she will try to overcome her situation as inessential object by radically assuming it; through her flesh, her feelings, and her behavior, she will exalt as sovereign the one she loves, she will posit him as value and supreme reality: she will efface herself before him. (Beauvoir 684)

Later on, in the early 1990s, Anna Jónasdóttir was groundbreaking in focusing her feminist research on love and she stated, in her book *Why Women are Oppressed* (1991), that "the concept of love can be understood, primarily, as sociosexual relational practices, and not only as emotions that dwell inside individuals" (4). Jónasdóttir, drawing on Marx's 'labour power', coined the concept 'love power' in which humans as sexual beings have a productive power (Gunnarsson 44). Jónasdóttir claims, in "What kind of power is 'Love Power'?" (2011), that "men tend to exploit women's capacities for love and transform these into individual and collective modes of power over which women lose control" (49). Gunnarsson has drawn on both Jónasdóttir's and many other's research on love and has further deepened the understanding of the field and in this essay I will be building on her findings.

Gunnarsson has analyzed “the tension inherent in contemporary heterosexual love between, on one hand, norms of equality and freedom of choice and, on the other, persisting inequality” (99-100). Her focus is on what she calls normalized asymmetric tendencies, which she claims are fundamental in contemporary western heterosexual love. She does not focus on how tasks in a heterosexual relationship are unequally shared, such as housework and childcare, but rather on the actual love interactions. Her definition of love is: “[T]he act of recognizing and affirming another person and her needs and goals as valuable in their own right, in a way not directed by one’s own needs and goals” (100). With this definition, she focuses more on the care than the erotic-estatic aspect of love, and focuses on love as an interhuman practice, which is what I will be doing in this essay as well (100). Her conclusion is that “the woman’s compromising with her own wishes is the taken-for-granted norm, whereas the man’s compromising with his own wishes appears, by means of a contrast effect, as an unselfish act of love” (102).

Following Hanne Haavind, Gunnarsson starts off from the assumption that:

[I]n a context of an ideology of gender equality, the experience of inequality ought to be largely incompatible with the experience of loving and being loved, such that when asymmetries prevail there must be mechanisms that make them appear legitimate if the experience of love is to survive. (100)

Drawing on a study by Carin Holmberg, Gunnarsson finds that such a mechanism is that women are likely to see things from the man’s perspective and relativize their own, while men are likely to see and judge the woman’s standpoint from their own perspective. This “gendered pattern of asymmetrical role-taking” has the effect that women often identify with the standpoint of the man, which means that they both think that her standpoint is invalid (101-102). Holmberg published her study in 1993 and it was based on individual interviews with both parties of ten Swedish, childless, heterosexual couples. The couples perceived themselves as equal and so did others (Gunnarsson 100). When the women in the study expressed dissatisfaction with how their partner behaved they tended to see their own dissatisfaction as subjective in relation to the man’s more absolute standpoint: “They may not like what he does, but ‘that’s how he is’” (101). Gunnarsson acknowledges that this is something that we could expect in a relationship. But, she proceeds, “the ‘right’ of these men to be loved for ‘who they are’ is premised on the withdrawing of this possibility for the

women. In order for the man to be the way he 'is', the woman has to follow" (Gunnarsson 101). Gunnarsson also drew from a study made by Wendy Langford, published in 1999, which was based on interviews with 15 heterosexual women about love, where the findings shared considerable similarities with the study made by Holmberg (100).

Tove Thagard, in her article "Gender, Power and Love: A Study of Interaction between Spouses", draws on Jónasdóttir's theory on 'love power' and Arlie Russell Hochschild's theory on "balance between givings and misgivings in love relationships" (359) and concludes that:

One consequence of male exploitation of women's love power may be that the husband more or less takes his wife's love for granted, and will thus not appreciate her consideration for him as a gift. Since the wife is not in a position to count on a corresponding love, even small signs of love from her husband may be considered gifts. (359)

Gunnarsson pinpoints two strategies women can use in order to get love in a heterosexual relationship with asymmetrical role-taking. Firstly, she shows the 'conformist strategy' where the woman identifies with her partner's wishes and needs at a level where they are almost felt as her own. Her gain is that she can frame her submission as her own choice and be valued by her partner for conforming. She can believe that she would still be loved even if she did not conform to her husband's needs. However, she will never know for sure that this is true, that she is loved for her own sake and not for submitting. If this strategy is used because the woman feels that this is the only way of being loved, she undermines her own dignity. The counterproductivity of this strategy is even more evident if the woman's efforts are not appreciated by her partner (107-108).

Secondly, Gunnarsson presents the 'resisting strategy' which involves struggling for one's own needs and wishes, even if they are contradicting those of the partner. If she succeeds, the woman will know that she is being valued in her own right. The risk is that she does not succeed and is experienced as "too demanding" and "unreasonable", in this case both her partner's love for her and also her love for him is threatened. In order to save the experience of love, she can use the 'conformist strategy' and save their experience of viewing each other as reasonable and lovable. She does this by approving of his view of her demands as being unreasonable. In this way, the woman can continue to see her partner as reasonable and lovable, which justifies all that she has "invested" in him. If the woman instead continues

to demand her needs and wishes to be met, she risks being left unloved, since the chance of finding a man who accepts such demands for symmetry are small (108-109). Gunnarsson concludes that:

[T]he love women get by adhering to gendered expectations is in a way also disabling them as persons, since it is premised on women being useful for others rather than valued in their own right, that is being loved in the proper sense of the term. This contradiction structures women's quest for love and compels them to balance between the risks and gains involved in conforming to subordinate femininity on one hand and those involved in resisting asymmetry on the other. (110)

The theory of 'conformist and resisting strategies' is central for my argument, since I find that Mia and the novel itself oscillate between these two strategies and eventually settle for conformity rather than resistance. In the first section of the analysis, the importance of the early experiences of love and gender in the family, both between the parents and their love towards Mia, and how these experiences affect her own marriage, are investigated. The second section of the analysis will be examining the importance of sisterhood and creativity for coping in a patriarchal society. This section will also investigate the act of excusing men with "that's how he is" in order to save the experience of love.

2. Understanding love and gender through experiences in the family

“The family is where we become ourselves – those early relations are crucial to who we go on to become – for better or worse” (Hustvedt quoted in Sethi). The importance of the parents in life and love is shown early in *Summer*. Hustvedt symbolically shows how a mother is someone whom you spend time with and a father is silent and receives gratitude. After having been let out of the psychiatric ward, Mia soon escapes Brooklyn to “spend time with [her] mother and put flowers on [her] father’s grave” (Hustvedt 4). She goes back to “older, more reliable territory, to the Land of M” (13), the M standing for “Mama”, where she slowly starts to mend (Bein 8). Bein argues that Mia’s return to her mother “represents Mia’s attempt to overcome the (lack of) male power that has made her ill” (10). In the middle of a crisis Mia finds that the best thing she can do is to go back to her mother, “my mother was a place for me as well as a person [. . .] it was my mother herself whom I had come home to” (Hustvedt 13). This stands in stark contrast to how she describes her father as “the paternal ghost” and how the place he was treated in and where he died scares her (5). Mia’s father is now as absent as one can be, he is dead, but as I will discuss in more length below, he was absent when he was alive too. The way Mia has grown up learning how men and women are to behave, through the behaviors of her parents, becomes a very important part to her understanding of what it is to love in a patriarchal society.

It is clear that the family stands for both support and restraints. Hustvedt created the name for Mia’s fictional hometown Bonden from the Norwegian word ‘bonden’, which means the farmer, and she also plays with the English word bond, both in its meaning of family bonds and as a restraint (Gallentine). This is significant since it shows how Mia’s hometown, and her mother somehow being the personification of it, means both important family bonds that also work as restraints.

The pattern of ‘love power’ in Mia’s parents’ relationship is based on the mother giving love and care and the father withdrawing it, which is repeated in Mia’s marital life. Marks has noted that Hustvedt makes a distinction between “the mother as a provider of attachment and recognition and the father as the more distant and withdrawn figure”, a theme that is recurring throughout her fictional work (63). In her essay “My Father/Myself” (2012), Hustvedt argues that “[t]here is a distance to fatherhood that isn’t part of motherhood” (Hustvedt in *Living* 65), which might explain why this is a recurring theme in Hustvedt’s work. Hustvedt has said that

Summer is a feminist novel (Hustvedt quoted by Freeman), which Kon-Yu is probable to agree with, since she finds that claiming the woman author is a subversive act (53).

As Mia's biggest support in life and the major provider of love and care, her mother is a very important inspiration for her which takes the form of both supportive and restrictive influences. The fact that she was, at least seemingly, a happy housewife and an impeccable mother sets high standards for Mia, which most probably has inspired her tendencies towards bad faith and restricted the ways she stood up for herself in her marriage. In contrast, her father was a withdrawn patriarch who made the money and had the power in the family, a distance that strongly affected Mia "[y]our moods are our weather and we want it always to be sunny. I want to please you, Dad [. . .] I want you to *see* me, see Mia [. . .] It was so easy with Mama, her hands holding my face, her eyes with mine [. . .] but you were too far" (Hustvedt 81).

Having learnt from her parents' gender roles, Mia finds herself torn between fighting for her own needs and accepting her gendered role in her marriage. One of the examples of this is that even though they both had jobs outside of the home, Boris a neuroscientist and Mia working at a university and as a poet, she took the main responsibility for their daughter and the household (Hustvedt 28). This can be viewed as a combination of Mia's bad faith and Boris exploiting her capacities for love and transforming them into power:

I am screaming, All these years you came first! You, never me! Who cleaned, did homework for hours, slogged through the shopping? Did you? Goddamned master of the universe! Phallic Übermensch off to a conference. (Hustvedt 28)

At the same time as her own fate upsets her, memories from when her mother sang to Mia and her sister at night, defended them against schoolteachers when needed and made beds for them when they were sick, so that they could be with her when she did her housework, shine bright. Her mother took care of Mia and her sister Bea and she cooked, baked, sewed, mended stockings, shined copper, arranged flowers and ironed sheets etcetera (Hustvedt 14). Mia's mother is old now, living in a retirement home, but "[a]lthough the indefatigable champion of domesticity had vanished, the woman who had fixed up a little bed to keep her sick children near her [was] undiminished" (15).

Beauvoir argued that a girl has a harder time trying to become an autonomous individual than a boy does, partly because neither a girl's family nor customs are helping her

in such attempts (381). One of the restraints that shaped Mia was that her closest family did not want or approve of some of the parts of her personality. When she was ill she thought that Boris was conspiring against her, which she later thinks of as a delusion. But she also realizes that it was a “howl against the way things are for me, a *cri de coeur* to be truly SEEN, not buried in the clichés and mirages of other people’s desires” (Hustvedt 104). Her father showed it with his eyebrows, her mother with her mouth and Boris frowned; they showed her that she was too loud and too forceful: “I am too fierce” (104). They did not even have to say anything, she understood from their body language. All of them were acting in order to keep Mia in her gendered role.

Beauvoir also argued that a girl does not want to entirely give herself to any undertaking because she is “afraid of missing her destiny as a woman” (381). According to Beauvoir, everything works together in order to “hold back her personal ambition while enormous social pressure encourages her to find a social position and justification in marriage” (381). Because of that, she finds that it is natural that the girl does not “seek to create her place in this world by and for herself or that she should seek it timidly” (381). Mia was one of those girls not being promoted by her family or society, to create space for herself. She was punished when she was “too forceful”. She did try, and times had changed from when her mother was younger, much due to the second wave of feminism, but when she failed she saw it as her own fault, that she has not fought in the right way. As Mahon has noted, while “[n]ot taking possession of adequate intellectual space she allows to Boris every liberty needed for career and personal progression” (639). Mia contemplates on the differences in how she and Boris fought for their space:

I hadn’t fought for myself or, rather, I hadn’t fought in the right way. Some people just take the room they need, elbowing out intruders to take possession of a space. Boris could do it without moving a muscle. All he had to do was stand there ‘quiet as a mouse.’ I was a noisy mouse, one of those that scratched in the walls and made a ruckus, but somehow it made no difference. The magic of authority, money, penises. (Hustvedt 7-8)

Coupling Beauvoir’s theory on why women have a harder time making space for themselves with Gunnarsson’s ‘conformist and resisting strategies’ explain why, although she tried to make space for herself, Mia gave up. She repeatedly used the ‘resisting strategy’ by bringing up the problems, but then balanced the risk of not being lovable by using the ‘conformist

strategy'. This, however, does not mean that her feelings went away, rather that she ignored them in order to save the experience of love between her and her partner. If she would have persisted with fighting for her needs, she might have succeeded, but there was also the risk of Boris not meeting them however much she fought, and in that case the whole meaning of love would too obviously be missing. She would have needed to leave the relationship in order to save her self-worth, and she could not jeopardize the marriage, in which she, in line with Beauvoir's theory, had committed her future and devoted herself in a way close to self-mutilation.

Mia's mother shares with her that she believes that her husband, Mia's father, fell in love with someone else during their marriage: "He returned to me, emotionally, I mean, to the degree that it was possible for him" (Hustvedt 31). He did not act on it, but Mia's mother had sometimes wished that he had: "He might, of course, have run off with her, and then again, he might have tired of it" (31). She stayed with him, even though it hurt her. He did not admit nor deny his feelings for this other woman, and after a few years he seemed not to think about her (31). She is waiting for him to come back to her emotionally and she would have done so even if he had left her for the other woman. For Mia and her mother, the "everyday speaking and listening [in marriage] establishes a reciprocal bond constantly threatened though constantly regained" (Mahon 649). The waiting sends a strong signal about men being worth it, even if they fall in love with someone else, and it mirrors the stage of Mia's life in the novel and might help her make her decision. Lisa Appignanesi claims in her critique of *Summer* in *The Guardian* that "Mia garners an appreciation of her mother and a womanly sense of what, to the child, is ever a mysterious parental duo". I understand the 'womanly sense' as Mia's understanding of what her parents' marriage, and maybe marriage in general, is like for women. Beauvoir explains how a girl understands the hierarchy between the sexes at an early age:

She first discovers the hierarchy of the sexes in the family experience; little by little she understands that the father's authority is not the one felt most in daily life, but it is the sovereign one; it has all the more impact for not being wasted on trifling matters; even though the mother reigns over the household, she is clever enough to put the father's will first[.] (Beauvoir 301)

Mia's psychoanalyst, Dr. S., has sensed a connection between Mia's father and her husband. She concludes that Mia has perhaps felt that it was her father that had the power in the family and that she, her mother and her sister were stepping around his feelings, in order not to upset him. Mia agrees to this and also to the fact that she has reproduced the same story in her own marriage, while she has been getting more and more angry. Mia tells Dr. S. about how she has enjoyed listening to a big storm, which "was like listening to my own rage, but rage with real power, big, masculine, godlike, magisterial, paternal bangs in the heavens" (Hustvedt 60). Dr. S. asks "if your anger had power, paternal power, you could shape things in your life more to your liking. Is that what you mean?". But Mia does not know (61), which might have to do with the fact that she does not want this to be true, because if it is that means that she has been oppressed, that she has been a part of not promoting herself.

Boris seems to have, consciously or unconsciously, picked up on Mia's doubts, which have been rooted in her childhood by her family and friends. This is easily done, since thoughts such as "You ARE overly sensitive" had been there already in her childhood (Hustvedt 25). The 'conformist strategy' includes the act of identifying with the partner's standpoint and Mia does this by questioning her needs and her worth over and over again:

[D]oubt, the deforming constant doubts that my poems were shit, a waste, that I had read my way not to knowledge but into an inscrutable oblivion, that I, not Boris, was to blame for the Pause, that my truly great work, Daisy, was behind me seemed all to be true. Now, menopausal, abandoned, bereft, and forgotten, I had nothing left. (Hustvedt 66)

Mia is identifying with her husband's standpoint and comes to the conclusion that she was to blame for his affair. Even though she later looks back on these thoughts as self-pity and feels better, she has also admitted to the doubts being constantly reoccurring (Hustvedt 70).

Mia is conforming to her gender role and one way of doing this is to have low expectations on having her needs met by her partner. He constantly downplays the worth of her feelings: "How many times had Boris said, 'Mia, you're blowing this way out of proportion['']" (Hustvedt 76). Mia realizes that the pain she experienced when Boris left her might stem from an early fear of not being lovable:

For better or for worse, I had become so entwined with Boris that his departure had ruptured me, sent me screaming into the asylum. And wasn't the fear I had felt old, the fear of

rejection, of disapproval, of being unlovable, a fear that may be older even than my explicit memory? (Hustvedt 182)

There is a contradiction in the novel which shows an important key to power that the men hold over the women: they only participate in talking about subjects that they prefer and are comfortable with. Yet, Mia and her mother praise the talks they have with their husbands. Her mother confides to her that “[h]e found it very difficult, you know, to talk to me about anything painful. He would say, ‘Please, I can’t, I can’t’” (Hustvedt 30). Boris did the same thing to Mia: *“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m waking up. Let me have my tea. We’ll talk later. I can’t talk about it. We’ve been over this a thousand times”* (51) [emphasis in the original]. Nevertheless, Mia’s mother misses their friendship and their talks: “He could, after all, talk about many things” (72). Boris, too, can talk about many things and Mia refers to him as her “interlocutor” and she experiences a “kind of aching mental loneliness” without him (93). Mia’s mother tells her that she “would do it all over again [. . .] [m]arry your father” and then she explains that even though she would have wished that he was a little different – “he wasn’t” (112). The behavior of the two women illustrate Holmberg’s study where women put themselves in the standpoint of their partner’s and accept that “that’s how he is”. These two men were clearly able to talk about the subjects that interested them, so they must have been able to talk about other things as well. But they refused to talk about subjects that were important to their wives but not to them, and claimed that they couldn’t. As Gunnarsson has concluded, women compromising with their wishes is the taken-for-granted norm (102), so Mia and her mother only had the choice of compromising and settle for what they got, if they wanted to save the experience of love.

Perhaps inspired by her mother’s stoic patience when her husband fell in love with someone else, Mia thinks to herself that Boris might be entitled to “romp and hump and carry on” but the thought that she might be too does not seem to strike her (Hustvedt 135). This is an example of having lower expectations on the man than on herself, as in Gunnarsson’s theory. She feels sorry for him, for having been stuck with her, she tries to understand him. “[P]oor Boris” she thinks “had lived with [. . .] my bawling ululations [. . .] a man for whom all conflict was anathema” (65-66). As well as putting herself down and taking the standpoint of her husband, she also exaggerates Boris’s acts:

How many times had he rubbed my feet while we watched a film together, patiently kneading and stroking the soles and the toes and the once-badly-broken ankle pained by arthritis? How many times had he looked up at me after I had washed his hair in the bathtub with the expression of a happy child? How many times had he embraced and rocked me after a rejection letter arrived? That was Boris, too, you see. (Hustvedt 89-90)

These small signs of love are viewed as gifts, in the sense that Thagaard has theorized gifts of love (359). It seems like Mia, in a position where she cannot count on corresponding love, exaggerates Boris's actions in order to be able to be with him. But her anger grows bigger by the day, because she knows that his actions and gifts do not at all stand in proportion to hers. Gunnarsson shows how expectations are important:

[E]ven though a person feels loved by her partner, if this is not based in her partner's practically realized care for her needs but by a lack of expectations to have her needs valued, her feeling of being loved will not have the effect of love proper; that is to say, it will not effectively empower her as person [. . .] Being validated as feminine person is paradoxically conditioned on the readiness to set aside one's own person. (Gunnarsson 107)

Towards the end of the novel, when Boris wants Mia back after his new lover broke up with him, he makes a list of six promises to Mia. The first five entail tasks and actions he promises to do, like talk to her more, not interrupt her when she is writing and buy juice and milk. The sixth one says "I will love you". Mia does not believe in the first five, they "would require a revolution of the sort I had ceased to believe in" (Hustvedt 194-195). Seeing this in the light of Gunnarsson's theory, it is obvious how Mia has extremely low expectations on Boris and that his love cannot effectively empower her as a person.

Beauvoir argued that a woman in love who is left by a man has nothing left because she has abandoned the world she knew to enter the land of the man; "she finds herself without a roof over her head and the desert all around her" (705). Symbolically, Mia lost the roof over her head because her home was too full of memories from her marriage (Hustvedt 4) and she experiences her life as a kind of desert without Boris since without him she has nothing left (66). "How could she begin a new life when outside her lover there is nothing?" (Beauvoir 705). In *Summer*, the answer of how to cope is sisterhood and creativity, as I will discuss in the next section.

3. Sisterhood, creativity and “that’s how he is”

In Bonden, Mia spends time with girls and women – at ages ranging from three to 102 – that are all important to her understanding of women’s fate in patriarchy. When it comes to sisterhood in *Summer*, I claim that there is on the one hand a quality of taking care of each other and form a resistance towards the patriarchal society, very often by using creativity. On the other hand, there is a tendency of following social conventions concerning gender roles and inspiring each other to make choices in line with such roles. Drawing on Gunnarssons’s theory, I suggest that the women in the novel use forms of both ‘conformist and resisting strategies’ in order to make love relationships possible. The main ‘resisting strategy’ that I will examine is creativity and the main ‘conformist strategy’ that I will investigate is to have low expectations on men’s capacities to care and to change, and the habit of excusing men’s behavior with “that’s how he is”.

Many critics and reviewers have pointed to the positive effects of the relationships that Mia has with the women in *Summer*. Marks, for example, argues that “the rich tapestry of social relations between women [. . .] help Mia overcome the rapture caused by her husband’s abandonment and make it possible for her to readmit him to her life” (65). Appignanesi considers that “[i]mmersed in the ungovernable emotions of others, Mia becomes more hospitable to herself and to her estranged husband” (Appignanesi). But to my knowledge, no one has pointed to the negative aspects. Marks points to the aspect of the women helping Mia take her husband back. I stress that this ‘help’ is also a problem. Mia’s relationships with the other women represent, with few exceptions, how women tend to make excuses for men, in order to be able to maintain love relationships with them. This has the effect that when Mia compares her experiences with theirs, they are rationalized, since this is what it means to love in a patriarchal society, where low expectations on men are normal. One more example of this is when Mia tells Dr. S. about her anger after receiving a very short e-mail from Boris after she left Brooklyn: “I wanted to send back a big gob of my saliva” (Hustvedt 18). But Dr. S. ensures her how guilty he must be feeling and how deeply it must affect him that their daughter is angry with him (18).

To Bein, “Mia [collects] as many versions of female life as she [needs] to form her truth of the story of her abandonment” (17). If Mia has formed a truth about being abandoned, based on the lives of the girls and women she has spent time with in Bonden, I would argue that it is a truth about what love is in a patriarchal society. Bein also argues that “the text

resonate[s] with postmodern theory” due to the emphasis on the absence of men and how the “literary characters desperately try to fill [the gap of the men] with meaning, mostly through artistic means” (1). I propose another reading, where the women do not try to fill the gap of men with their artistry, but rather struggle to cope in a patriarchal society which values men higher than women and where women’s needs are not met.

Mia uses reading and writing as means to cope with her situation, i.e. by writing a novel about her experiences; writing, reading and teaching poetry; writing about her sexual experiences before Boris; writing e-mails; reading fiction and non-fiction; engaging in her mother’s book club etcetera. As a narrator she critiques patriarchal norms throughout the novel. Bein argues that “Mia’s writing allows her to give meaning to her illness as an identity crisis which was necessary for her personal development” and “Mia writes her own truth, creates her version of herself, a self different from the one before being abandoned by her husband” (Bein 16). The ‘necessary’ in Bein’s argument implies that the crisis, and thus Boris’s behavior, was something Mia needed in her life to become a more fulfilled person. I agree to the fact that it was beneficial for Mia to “reconstitute her own independent boundaries” away from her husband who she found overbearing (Appignanesi), but I question the fact that the crisis is seen as needed to make Mia a fulfilled person. If that is true, it implies that she should be grateful to Boris for being unfaithful and leaving her. Additionally, the fact that Mia “writes her own truth” points to some kind of self-deception.

Bein claims that although Mia’s writing about her own situation is important, “it seems as if her reflections on other women’s lives are more revealing to her in terms of finding new meaning for herself” (11). Mia starts off from her own mother and then “moves through the different steps of her life, inspired by the girls and women of ages from baby to grandmother” (11), “the story is a journey through the stages of female life for Mia” (14). The stages of her own life that Mia revisits through her writing and female relationships all, one way or another, work towards both creative resistance and accepting gender roles and patriarchy.

Mia teaches poetry to a group of seven pubescent girls that are involved in their own drama, where one of the girls is bullied by the others. This reminds Mia of a similar experience in her teens, when her mother came to her rescue and arranged an escape for her, by putting her in another school (Hustvedt 37). Mia realizes that she shares traits with the bullied girl Alice – a vulnerability and a wish to be “so very, very good” (154). She realizes that they are both “kinda different” and how she herself is: “Not one of the gang. Outside,

always outside” (130). Mia solves the situation with her students by giving them the task of writing about the experience from the perspective of one of the other persons. Bein argues that “Mia shows her poetry class [that] the truth is what you decide it to be”. But she also acknowledges Mia’s claim that the story the girls write is (16) “not true; it was a version they could all live with” (Hustvedt 201). This way of manipulating truth so that you can live with it is a mechanism used in order to cope with reality and can be used as a strategy of conforming. The power of creativity is evident here, where seeing the perspective of others is promoted and works to help the girls. But to constantly see things from someone else’s perspective is not always positive, and in Mia’s case it has made her compromise too much with her own needs. Her feelings of being “kinda different” may be important in why she immersed herself so in her husband and his standpoint during their marriage, in order to gain transcendence.

The young mother, Lola, next door to the house that Mia rents reminds Mia of her life as a new mother (Bein 14). Lola, and her two children, babyboy Simon and three-year-old Flora, become important to Mia during her stay in Bonden. Lola’s husband Pete travels a lot in his work and is rarely home, when he is he scares his family by being aggressive. Bein has focused on the impact the baby has on Mia, she “dwells in memories of her own days as a young mother” (Hustvedt 14) which is important for her self-search. However, I find the relationship that Lola and her husband have is also very important in Mia’s story. Lola stays with her abusive and absent husband even though it hurts her and scares the children. But it is also revealed that he had a sister who was born with many handicaps, placed in a home and died at the age of seven. The father had not visited the child in the hospital once. To Mia, this seems to make Pete’s actions more understandable: “I had been more comfortable with the angry cipher Pete than with this new person, the young man with the dead sister” (85). The fact that his father seems to have been emotionally disturbed and his dead sister makes it harder for Mia to fully dislike him (84-85), at the same time as this is humane, it also serves as an excuse for his abusive actions.

During the same week, a store agrees to sell Lola’s jewelry creations and she gets a heritage from her godmother. These two events become her saviors’ in the relationship (Hustvedt 197-198). Her success and the fact that she has her own money form a sort of power for her. Her gained power has nothing to do with the man changing. She doesn’t change her behavior much either, but she does put up some sort of resistance when taking the children with her and spending the night with Mia. He calls her the next morning and before

she goes back to him, she says to Mia: “It never changes. It’s always the same. You’d think I’d wise up, wouldn’t you? It gave him a start, though, when I wasn’t home, scared him” (162-163). Lola is balancing between conforming and resisting by scaring Pete with her absence. As it turns out, none of them change, but things in Lola’s life change and this leads to a better position for her. This confirms the suspicion that the men in Hustvedt’s novel do not change. It is either the women or the circumstances that change.

According to Lola, her husband seems to wish that Flora was “a sweet little thing” but in reality he worries that “there’s something wrong with her, hyperactivity or something” and he hates the wig she insists on wearing (Hustvedt 83). Flora calls the wig her “air” (95), probably because she cannot say ‘h’, but symbolically the wig probably represents air and freedom for her, a place where she can hide from her father’s aggression and limiting gender roles. Flora also uses her imagination to deal with the fact that she is seen as too loud, she assigns the negative feedback she gets to her cuddly toys: “He was bad today. Too loud” (102). Flora functions as an important clue to how early girls are put in their role as “sweet things”, and mirrors Mia’s experience of being found too fierce.

One of Mia’s mother’s friends, Abigail, becomes very important to Mia as she reveals her ‘private amusements’, which are handicrafts that are ordinary on the surface but when examined further contain for example masturbating women, naked breasts, a woman wearing only high heeled shoes while sucking up the town of Bonden and its men with a vacuum cleaner (Hustvedt 39-43). Abigail says about the piece with the woman in heels that: “I was spitting mad at the time. Made me feel better” (43). For Abigail, art was a way to express herself in a society where she lacked “freedom of speaking her mind as a woman” (Bein 12), but she could not “come right out with it” so she made the “little scenes within scenes” (Hustvedt 41). Her art can be seen as both a ‘conformist and resisting strategy’. She secretly resists, but on the surface she conforms. Since no one else knows that she wants to resist, the strategy leans to conforming; creating a space to breathe in while letting things go on as usual. As with Mia’s writing, Abigail seems to have coped with living in a patriarchal society by the act of making art. Bein argues that “[e]ncountering a woman’s life story that is different in content but same in meaning to Mia’s own experiences and is expressed in art helps Mia move from the state of ‘spitting madness’ to ‘feeling better’” (12). I agree with Bein that meeting another woman with similar experiences in illness and art helps Mia, but I

additionally want to explore another aspect of the importance of their relationships as well – the fact that Abigail left her husband.

Abigail is the only woman in *Summer* who has had a divorce. After the divorce from her husband, who had come home from the war a changed, raging and heavily drinking person and then disappeared for a year, she became a grade school art teacher (Hustvedt 189). Abigail tells Mia that she loved a woman, Laura, when she was young (191). It is striking that the only woman in the novel divorcing a man does not seem to have loved him, but someone else. Abigail “married [her husband] on an impulse” and she didn’t really know him (189). It is therefore hard to see her resistance to her husband as a way of leaving a man she loves because he treats her bad, and hence her story might not be similar enough for Mia to be influenced by her brave action. The situation for Abigail is rather, as Bein argues, that “the traditional and heteronormative gender roles in rural America had forced her to suppress her pleasures and desires” (12).

Towards the end of the novel, Mia finds herself contemplating whether to take Boris back or not. She thinks that infidelity is “both ordinary and forgivable, as is the rage of the betrayed spouse” (Hustvedt 181-182). She wonders how things will be between them after her husband’s “interlude” and if people can change (182). In the end, she concludes that Boris comes closer and closer to her heart “and the explanation was [. . .] all the time spent, and the daughter [. . .] the talking and the fighting and the sex [. . .] our bodies and thoughts and memories had gotten themselves so tangled up that it was hard to see where one person’s ended and the other’s began” (214-215). In addition to all of the social encouragement on her to take her husband back, her sister writes to her: “Just remember, Baby Huey, we all screw up” (188), and her daughter pleads to her “[h]e’s trying, can’t you see? He feels bad” (206). So in the end, with her husband on the doorstep, she says “[l]et him come to me” (216). The fact that she does not go to him is presumably an attempt to preserve the power his mistake has given her since he has admitted to wanting her back. She also compares their story with happy endings in fiction and cinema where couples reunite, seemingly as an additional way of convincing herself that re-marriage is the right thing. So her self-search resulted in her feeling better about herself again, after her breakdown, but I argue that taking her husband back is not, as others have claimed, a happy ending, but a step back for Mia, into a marriage where she disappeared once and might do again.

4. Conclusion

By examining Siri Hustvedt's *Summer* in terms of what mechanisms and social conventions that affect Mia in her decision to take her husband back, this essay has provided a different reading of the novel compared to previous critics and reviewers. My argument is that the ending of *Summer*, the so called re-marriage, suggests a betrayal of the feminist critique and the attempts at resistance that the novel presents.

In this essay I have investigated why this potential betrayal occurs, by using materialist feminist theory and previous research on *Summer*. The first section of the analysis examines how Mia's parents are important for her understanding of love and gender, and finds that their patterns of 'love power' has highly influenced Mia and she repeats the same pattern in her own marriage, where she gives up her transcendence. Even though she is aware of and orally partakes in the feminist struggle, she falls back into self-blame and the standpoint of her husband. Gunnarsson's theory of 'conformist and resisting strategies' is helpful in order to understand the mechanisms at work when this occurs. Mia is balancing between the two strategies, but in the end she seems to settle for the 'conformist strategy' in order to save the experience of loving and being loved.

The second section of this essay examines how the relations with the other characters, particularly the women, help her understand and cope with what love is in a patriarchal society. It also investigates how imagination and the production of art is significant in relation to love in the novel. The girls and women in the novel become important for Mia both as a way of mending but also to help her further normalize that heterosexual love relationships are unequal and accept that her husband will not change because "that's how he is". Imagination and the production of art become a place to breathe in a patriarchal society where options are limited for women. As a strategy, this becomes both 'resisting and conformist', on the one hand the different kinds of art presented let the women express themselves as a way of resisting their oppression, but on the other hand it does not lead to actual change in the exchanges of love, and things go on as usual.

For the understanding of the novel, this implies that although there is a feminist critique throughout the book, it does seem to recycle some problematic ideas of gender and legitimize unequal heterosexual love relationships. *Summer* is a complex work of art which opens for multiple interesting research in the future, it would for example be interesting to investigate the mother-daughter relationships further.

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